

World Watch Research

Turkmenistan: Background Information

September 2024



OpenDoors

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

Open Doors International / World Watch Research

September 2024

© Open Doors International

Open Doors Sverige

sweden@od.org | 019-31 05 00 | www.open-doors.se

Contents

Copyright and sources	1
Map of country	2
Recent history	2
Political and legal landscape	4
Religious landscape.....	6
Economic landscape.....	7
Social and cultural landscape.....	8
Technological landscape	10
Security situation	11
Christian origins	12
Church spectrum today.....	12
Further useful reports.....	13
External Links	13

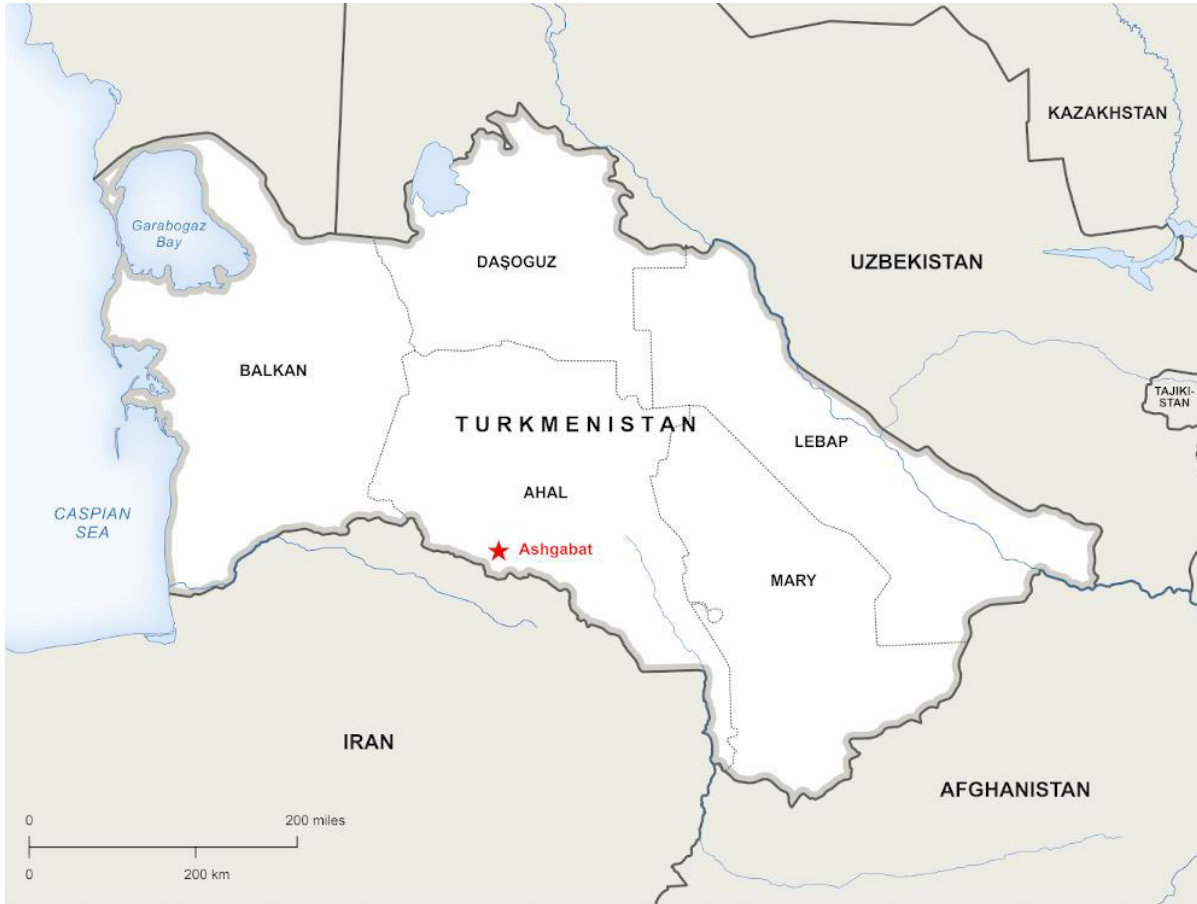
Copyright and sources

World Watch Research has divided up the previously named Full Country Dossier into two separate documents:

- Background country information (published annually in summer)
- Persecution dynamics (published annually in January).

These documents are the property of World Watch Research (WWR), the research department of Open Doors International. They include data and analysis based around Open Doors World Watch List (WWL) and statistical information on world religions, Christian denominations and people groups prepared by the World Christian Database (WCD). Highlighted links in the text can be found written out in full at the end of each document under the heading “External links”. These documents may be used and distributed free of charge, but please always acknowledge the source as: © Open Doors International.

Map of country



Turkmenistan: Population (UN estimate for 2024)	Christians	Chr%
6,598,000	164,000	2.5

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., World Christian Database, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

Recent history

After 69 years as part of the Soviet Union, Turkmenistan declared its independence on 27 October 1991. Until the death of former President Saparmurat Niyazov in 2006, the country had been in the tight grip of his quasi-religious personality cult, based on his book called “Ruhnama”. The philosophy embedded in this “book of the Turkmen soul” dominated public life and was taught in schools and universities. Perhaps the climax of this reverence was the construction of a huge tower in the capital Ashgabat which was topped by a golden, rotating statue of the president. The statue was always facing the sun. The official explanation was that the sun followed the statue, not the other way round. It is hardly surprising that observers used to refer to the country as the North Korea of Central Asia.

Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov took office after President Niyazov’s death in December 2006 and overturned some of his decisions, e.g. the plan to re-name months and days according to Turkmen heroes, but he had to move carefully in deposing his predecessor who had been revered almost like a

god. The compulsory teaching of Ruhnama in the country's education system was gradually reduced. The golden statue was moved to the outskirts of Ashgabat.

It did not take long before Berdymukhamedov developed his own personality cult around the honorary title "Arkadag" (Protector). After Berdymukhamedov's re-election in 2012, an "Era of Supreme Happiness" was announced. The regime decided to tear down thousands of homes and rebuild the capital Ashgabat as a white marbled city. On 25 May 2015 the authorities in Turkmenistan unveiled a giant statue of President Berdymukhamedov on horseback, holding a dove - everything covered with a layer of 24-carat gold. In September 2016 constitutional amendments were made to allow the president to run in future presidential elections regardless of his age.

In July 2019 there was commotion in Turkmenistan when the rumor spread that President Berdymukhamedov was [dead](#), (RFE/RL, 29 July 2019) after not being seen in public for a number of weeks. However, he re-appeared later in August 2019 at the [opening of a conference](#) (RFE/RL, 12 August 2019). No explanation was ever given for his absence, but it shows how central the president is to the life of the nation.

When the COVID-19 crisis began in early 2020, President Berdymukhamedov denied that any pandemic had reached the country. The claim of there being no infections was accepted by a [WHO delegation](#) visiting in July 2020 (UN Press briefing, 15 July 2020). In November 2020, the Turkmen government still [claimed](#) the absence of COVID-19 infections and deaths, but measures including mask-wearing and travel restrictions had meanwhile been imposed (VOA news, 30 November 2020). The total denial of the presence of the pandemic in Turkmenistan has been maintained.

On 12 February 2022, the 64 year old president hinted that he had plans to resign. Three days later his son Serdar was nominated as a presidential candidate hours after the Central Election Commission launched the first stage of the country's campaign in an early presidential election (Source: [RFE/RL, 14 February 2022](#)). The early presidential elections were held on 12 March 2022 and as expected Serdar Berdymukhamedov won with 72.97% of the vote (Source: [RFE/RL, 15 March 2022](#)). 11 months later, Human Rights Watch came with the following summary: "A change in leadership in Turkmenistan in 2022 did not lead to improvements in its human rights record. The country remained one of the most closed and repressive in the world. The government tolerates no political pluralism, independent media, or nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Authorities jail perceived opponents and government critics. The fate and whereabouts of dozens of victims of enforced disappearances remain unknown. The government failed to adequately address a worsening food security crisis. Freedom of movement is subject to substantial restrictions" ([HRW 2023 Turkmenistan country chapter](#)).

When the war in Ukraine broke out in February 2022 the Turkmen government initially refrained from making any public statement about its standpoint. This changed, however, in December 2022 when the government clearly took sides with Russia (Source: [RFE/RL, 14 December 2022](#)). Turkmenistan has become increasingly loyal to Russia in recent years, which counterbalances the growing Chinese influence over the country. Most other significant players in the region (e.g., Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan) expressed a more cautious approach towards Russia's advance into Ukraine (Source: [Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, 19 January 2024](#)).

Political and legal landscape

Turkmenistan is a presidential republic, whereby the President of Turkmenistan is both head of state and head of government. No true opposition parties are allowed. Power is concentrated in the presidency; the judiciary is wholly subservient to the government, with all judges appointed for five-year terms by the president without legislative review.

According to the US State Department ([IRFR 2023 Turkmenistan](#)):

- “The constitution provides for freedom of religion and worship and for the right of individuals to choose their religion, express and disseminate their religious beliefs, and participate in religious observances and ceremonies. The constitution separates the roles of government and religion, stipulating religious organizations are prohibited from interference in state affairs or carrying out state functions. The constitution states public education shall be secular in nature. It provides for the equality of citizens before the law regardless of their religious preference.”
- “The law requires all religious organizations, including those already registered, to reregister with the Ministry of Justice (MOJ) whenever the organization changes its address or amends its legal charter. The law permits the registration only of those religious organizations that have at least 50 resident members age 18 or older; a similar requirement applies to nonreligious civil associations. The law defines a religious organization as a voluntary association of citizens affiliated with a religion, organized to conduct religious services and other rites and ceremonies and/or to provide religious education, that is registered in accordance with the country's legislation.”
- “By law, the State Commission on Religious Organizations and Expert Evaluation of Religious Information Resources (SCROEERIR) is responsible for helping religious organizations register with government agencies, explaining the law to representatives of religious organizations, monitoring the activities of religious organizations to ensure they comply with the law, assisting with the translation and publication of religious literature, and promoting understanding and tolerance among different religious organizations.”
- “Unregistered religious organizations and their unregistered subsidiary congregations may not legally conduct religious activities; establish places of worship; gather for religious services, including in private residences; produce or disseminate religious materials; or proselytize. Any such activity is punishable as an administrative offense by fines ranging from 100 to 2,000 manat (\$29 to \$570), with higher fines for religious leaders and lower fines for members.”
- “To register or reregister, organizations must submit to SCROEERIR their contact information; proof of address, a statement requesting registration signed by the founders and board members of the organization, two copies of the organization's charter, and the names, addresses, and dates of birth of the organization's founders. They must pay a registration fee that starts at 300 manat (\$86) and is based on the size of the organization and where it is registered. Once SCROEERIR endorses an application for registration, it is submitted to the MOJ, which coordinates an inter-ministerial approval process involving the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of National Security, Ministry of Internal Affairs, and other government offices. According to government procedures, the MOJ may additionally request the biographic information of all members of an organization applying for registration. Each congregation of a registered religious organization must also register, and the registration process is the same as that of the parent organization.”

According to [USCIRF 2024 Turkmenistan Chapter](#):

- USCIRF classifies Turkmenistan as recommended for the category "Countries of Particular Concern" (CPC).
- "In 2023, religious freedom conditions in Turkmenistan remained poor. The government maintained strict control over all aspects of religious life and prosecuted individuals who did not adhere to it."
- "Turkmenistan remains one of the world's most repressive countries, making documenting religious freedom violations challenging. The state has deprived its citizens of virtually all political and civil rights and imprisoned civil society activists for their work and perceived criticism of authorities. Turkmenistan ranks at the bottom for press freedom, as no independent media exists within the country, and journalists risk criminal prosecution and other forms of retribution for their work. Turkmen citizens, furthermore, faced significant obstacles communicating with the outside world. The government has blocked foreign media, social media, and messaging websites and rendered unblocked websites practically useless due to internet speeds that were among the slowest in the world. Turkmens living abroad risked deportation or retaliation against their families members who remained in Turkmenistan if they criticized the Turkmen government or raised concerns about human rights."

Gender perspective

According to the law, men and women have equal constitutional rights in relation to marriage, divorce, custody and inheritance. Despite this, the persistence of discriminatory religious and customary laws – as well as harmful gender norms - results in gender inequality. In a [2018 periodic report](#), the CEDAW Committee noted that Turkmenistan had inadequate laws in relation to gender-based violence (particularly domestic violence) and that women had limited access to assets (CEDAW, 25 July 2018). Furthermore, the systemic impunity granted to perpetrators was highlighted as an issue of concern, in addition to inadequate access to justice for victims. Despite being illegal, child marriage also remains an ongoing practice, with 6% of girls being married before the age of 18 ([Girls Not Brides Turkmenistan](#), accessed 10 September 2024).

Turkmenistan came under criticism in 2022 for imposing new restrictions on women's appearance and their ability to travel, a move that has been linked to a 'Taliban-style' of rule ([RFE/RL, 4 May 2022](#); [The Diplomat, 3 May 2022](#)). Such developments have led women's rights groups in Turkmenistan to label the newly elected leader as a "misogynist president" ([AsiaNews, 12 May 2022](#)).

Within the armed forces, Christian men have faced hostile treatment and harassment. Military service is mandatory in Turkmenistan, with men obliged to serve for two years between the ages of 18 and 30. Evasion of military service is punishable with up to two years in prison ([World Factbook Turkmenistan](#), accessed 10 September 2024). In December 2022, the government began to offer an alternative to required national service for conscientious objectors ([US State Department IRFR 2022 Turkmenistan](#)).

Religious landscape

Turkmenistan: Religious context	Number of adherents	%
Christians	164,000	2.5
Muslim	6,165,000	93.4
Hindu	0	0.0
Buddhist	970	0.0
Ethnic religionist	1,100	0.0
Jewish	510	0.0
Bahai	1,500	0.0
Atheist	50,100	0.8
Agnostic	214,000	3.2
Other	820	0.0
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., World Christian Database, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

According to the World Christian Database (accessed May 2024) 93.4% of the population of Turkmenistan is (predominantly Sunni) Muslim. As reported by the US State Department (IRFR 2022 Turkmenistan): "There are small pockets of Shia Muslims, consisting largely of ethnic Iranians, Azeris, and Kurds, some located in Ashgabat, with others along the border with Iran and in the western city of Turkmenbashi." Despite the large Islamic majority, it would be wrong to call Turkmenistan a Muslim country. 70 years of atheism during the Soviet era have left a deep influence. The government is staunchly secular and has the country's Islamic community firmly under control. Muslim citizens follow basic Islamic culture rather than strict doctrine.

According to WCD the next largest religious categories are agnostics and atheists (in total 4.0% of the population), found particularly in the capital Ashgabat and other major cities. This is the result of 70 years of forced atheism by the government of the USSR from 1917 to 1991 and by the Turkmen regimes of Presidents Niyazov and Berdymukhamedov since then.

Christians are a very small group, making up only 2.5% of the population. The small Christian minority is weak due to much division and little cooperation between the various denominations. There are but few exceptions to this and it plays into the hands of the government.

There is little freedom of religion in Turkmenistan despite the claims to the contrary in the country's Constitution. The authoritarian government of Turkmenistan uses a vast number of state agents

(police, secret services, local imams) to closely monitor all religious activities and has imposed an array of restrictions on all religions, not only targeting Christian faith.

According to US State Department ([IRFR 2023 Turkmenistan](#)):

- “According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, there are 134 religious organizations in the country, composed of Muslim (105 Sunni and five Shia), 13 Russian Orthodox, 10 other Christian confessions and one Bahai.”
- “Some minority religious leaders said that persons who were not Sunni Muslim or Russian Orthodox continued to report harassment in society, such as public shaming by family members, friends, and neighbors and pressure to return to their original faith, although these incidents were isolated and occurred more often outside the large cities. Some religious groups reported an increase in what one Catholic leader said was "religious curiosity" - a wider interest in the country in religious issues over the last 30 years.”

Economic landscape

According to the [World Bank Turkmenistan data](#) (accessed 10 September 2024):

- **GDP (current US\$) (billions):** 59.894 (in 2023)
- **GDP growth (annual %):** 6.3 (in 2023)
- **Inflation, consumer prices (annual %):** No data available
- **Personal remittances, received (% of GDP):** No data available
- **Unemployment, total (% of total labor force) (modeled ILO estimate):** 4.1%

Turkmenistan is very rich in oil and natural gas and has been a major exporter of both for decades, mainly to Russia and China. In [April 2019](#), after settling its commercial dispute with Turkmenistan, Russia's Gazprom resumed gas imports (halted in 2016) from this Central Asian state (Jamestown Foundation, 2 October 2019). Most of Turkmenistan's gas goes to China, via the Central Asia-China pipeline. This west-east pipeline also pumps gas from Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, restricting Ashgabat's options to augment the volumes it sends to China. Until the fourth string of this pipeline is completed, Turkmenistan needs an alternative export route, weakening Ashgabat's position in negotiations with Moscow. Moreover, Turkmenistan is repaying Chinese loans for the construction of the Central Asia-China pipeline through subsidized or even free gas exports. Falling oil prices further affected Turkmenistan's gas contracts with China since their negotiated prices were indexed to international crude oil prices.

The considerable growth of GDP in pre-pandemic years – per capita as well as in percentage – did not improve the living conditions of all citizens on an equal basis. The huge drop in the price of oil since 2014 has had a negative effect on Turkmenistan's economy, causing the planned reconstruction of the capital Ashgabat to be delayed.

The government is known for gross [mismanagement](#) of the economy and has seemingly scant regard for the welfare of the general public (RFE/RL, 7 December 2019). Food shortages and price surges in [Turkmenistan](#) first appeared in late 2016, although the authorities have never publicly acknowledged or addressed them (RFE/RL, 27 September 2019). Despite the country's potential wealth due to enormous amounts of natural gas and other commodities, only a very small elite benefits from it.

Turkmenistan does not have **billions** of dollars available to spend defending its currency and the government has rejected advice for years that it should devalue the manat (RFE/RL, 23 April 2020). According to reports, "another sign the Central Asian energy-rich nation may be cash-strapped" is that cash **withdrawals** via ATM have been restricted (RFE/RL, 6 April 2020). Food shortages and price rises that began about five years ago show no sign of abating and are pushing more people into poverty. But instead of working to fix the economy, the government in Ashgabat is stepping up control of people's access to information. (Source: [RFE/RL, 16 November 2021](#))

Christians in Turkmenistan are under severe state pressure. Additionally, they suffer like the rest of the population from the deteriorating economy. For instance: Although the COVID-19 pandemic never officially reached Turkmenistan, in **March 2020**, food prices reached record levels in the Turkmen capital as the government restricted entry into Ashgabat amid apparent government efforts to prevent any spread of COVID-19 (RFE/RL, 25 March 2020). In November 2021 small private shops in the Turkmen capital, Ashgabat, were shut down apparently as a measure to prevent the spread of the coronavirus although the authorities continued to deny the presence of COVID-19 within the country's borders (Source: [RFE/RL, 5 November 2021](#)).

Gender perspective

As highlighted by Georgetown's Women, Peace and Security Index, Turkmenistan has shown improvement in recent years in relation to financial inclusion for women (in part reflecting the impact of the [2016 Employment Act](#)) which allowed women greater access to jobs ([GIWPS Turkmenistan](#), accessed 10 September 2024). Greater gender parity has also been reached in the context of education, although boys remain more likely to study at the tertiary level than girls. Despite these positive developments, women and girls continue to lose out in matters of inheritance due to ongoing patrilineal inheritance practices.

Social and cultural landscape

According to the [World Factbook Turkmenistan](#) (accessed 10 September 2024):

- **Main ethnic groups:** Turkmen 85%, Uzbek 5%, Russian 4%, other 6% (2003 estimate)
- **Main languages:** Turkmen (official) 72%, Russian 12%, Uzbek 9%, other 7%
- **Urban population: 54% of total population (2023)**
- **Literacy rate:** 99.7% (male: 99.8%, female: 99.6%) (2015)

According to the [UNDP Human Development Report Turkmenistan](#) (data updates as of 13 March 2024):

- **HDI score and ranking:** 0.744 (- for females, - for males), ranking 94 (2022)
- **Life expectancy at birth:** 69.4 years (72.9 for females, 65.9 for males) (2022)
- **Expected years of schooling:** 13.2 years (13.2 for girls, 13.2 for boys) (2022)
- **Gender inequality index:** 0.177 (2021)
- **Labor Force Participation Rate:** Female: 36.5, Male: 55.6 (2021)

In April 2022: Turkmen police began monitoring the people queuing at state grocery stores, taking pictures and filming customers to prevent them from returning to buy extra bread. As they studied the crowds, police warned that anyone found buying more than their allotment of bread would face a

penalty of up to 15 days in jail. The authoritarian government in Turkmenistan has been forced to tighten controls as poverty and economic hardship grow across the country despite its wealth of energy resources. The country has seen a dramatic increase in the number of households relying on government-subsidized food. (Source: [RFE/RL, 22 April 2022](#))

In December 2022: “Education officials along with police and intelligence officers held several meetings with students and employees in the Balkan and Lebap provinces, urging people to shun Western media and culture that they say brainwash young Turkmen” (Source: [RFE/RL, 14 December 2022](#)).

In February 2023: [RFE/RL](#) reported that many citizens were planning to leave Turkmenistan. There are many important reasons for doing this - massive unemployment, extremely high inflation, food shortages, corruption, and a government bent on controlling every facet of its citizens’ lives. [AsiaNews](#) reported in April 2023 that the situation had not improved.

Locals in Turkmenistan's western Balkan region on the Caspian Sea are used to a temporary "abundance of food" during the summer vacation season, which usually lasts from June to late September. During the summer season, state stores in the resort regions get plenty of subsidized food that caters both to holidaymakers and the locals in the backdrop of a longstanding food crisis in the isolated Central Asian nation. It also forces private food stores and bazaars to drop their prices. But the cheap food all but disappears as soon as the vacation season ends, residents in the regional capital, Turkmenbashi, told RFE/RL. Staples like rice, cooking oil, meat, eggs, potatoes, and onions are now seldom found in government stores, they complain. (Source: [RFE/RL, 17 October 2023](#))

In some regions of Turkmenistan, starting from the great velayat of Mari, there has been a notable lack of school literature for some years now, and a ministerial directive has been issued to overcome this problem by moving to digital libraries. But this contrasts with the very poor quality of the online network, which is also due to the tight police control to prevent the dissemination of undesirable material. (Source: [AsiaNews, 2 February 2024](#))

In February 2024 the Committee for the Application of Standards of the UN International Labor Organization (ILO) published an expert report on the exploitation of child labor in various countries around the world. Commenting on the situation in Turkmenistan, the report highlights that cotton pickers are forced to work in dangerous and unsanitary conditions, remaining in the fields at temperatures ranging from -10 degrees to +40, suffer the effects of harmful chemicals, and are not assisted either for protect themselves, nor to get the necessary medical support. You also have to pay for your own travel and food during working hours. The involvement of minors and young people is not officially organized by the State but is activated both through systems of coercion and out of necessity due to the poverty of families, and often also concerns boys and girls under 15 years of age. (Source: [AsiaNews, 27 February 2024](#))

In general, Christians experience the same problems as all other people in the country and are not especially targeted economically or socially. The only exception to this is the pressure from the social environment (family, local imams, villagers) on Christians with a Muslim background.

Gender perspective

In May 2022, the presidency of Serdar Berdimukhamedov began with measures to crack down on women's rights in Turkmenistan, earning the newly elected leader a reputation for being a "misogynist president." Not that his father Gurbanguly, now president of the Senate, was much more accommodating when it came to civil rights, but he did not seem to be particularly hostile towards the female population as much as his 40-year-old son is (Source: [RFE/RL, 12 May 2022](#)).

There remain strong stereotypes in Turkmenistan about the roles of men and women. Women are viewed primarily as mothers and caregivers, assuming a disproportionate domestic workload (often in addition to a job), whereas men are viewed as financial providers and decision makers. According to Georgetown ([GIWPS Turkmenistan](#), accessed 10 September 2024), Turkmenistan scored worst in the region for discriminatory gender norms. Whilst Turkmenistan scored relatively highly in relation to community safety in GIWPS 2021, women and girls remain vulnerable to sexual harassment and abuse in the public sphere ([CEDAW, 2018](#)). Violence within the home reportedly rose within the context of COVID-19 lockdown restrictions and remains rife ([UN Turkmenistan, July 2020](#); [OSCE, September 2021](#)). Violence victims (usually women) rarely report crimes, resulting in widespread impunity for perpetrators ([CEDAW, 2018](#)). There is strong stigma attached to sexual harassment and rape in particular, meaning such attacks are rarely reported or taken to court. This broad societal acceptance of gender-based violence provides an avenue that can be exploited for the means of religiously motivated persecution.

Technological landscape

According to [DataReportal Digital 2024: Turkmenistan](#) (23 February 2024) / survey date - January 2024:

- **Internet usage:** 39.5% penetration
- **Social media usage:** 1.7% of the total population. As of January 2024, 54.0% of social media users were female, while 46.0% were male.
- **Active cellular mobile connections:** 66.2 % of the total population. Compared to other regions, Central Asia has a relatively [small gender gap](#) in relation to cell phone ownership, although men are more likely to own a phone (GSMA, 2020).

According to [BuddeComm Research](#) (accessed 1 May 2024):

- "The hermit nation of Turkmenistan, which rivals only North Korea for its isolationism, continues to keep its telecom sector – along with the broader populace – under tight control."
- "The country inched up just one point off the bottom of the world rankings for press and internet freedom in the most recent report from Reporters Without Borders. Most social networks in the country are blocked, although locals do have access to the government-developed Biz Byarde (We Are Here) platform released in 2019. All internet users, however, need to identify themselves before logging on, and strict censorship over what can be viewed is in force. The end result is that Turkmenistan has one of the lowest penetration rates for internet access in the world."
- "The President of the republic, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow, announced early presidential elections for mid-March 2022. There is, therefore, some prospect – admittedly very slim – of a loosening of restrictions on the country's telecom sector following regime change. But with the

President's son already widely tapped to be the successor, there seems little chance of Turkmenistan moving far away from the bottom of the world's Telecom Maturity Index any time soon."

Despite Turkmenistan not being included in Freedom House's Freedom on the Net report, as indicated above, Turkmenistan is one of the most closed countries when it comes to the Internet. There are several Internet cafés in the capital Ashgabat, but access to most international websites is blocked. The government has a monopoly on Internet access, and uses computer programs to search emails for coded words and block suspicious messages. Foreign Christian sites are blocked. Low connection speeds do not allow the downloading of content from the few websites that are available.

In December 2021, cable.co.uk said in a report on worldwide broadband speed in 2021 that Turkmenistan, with an Internet speed of 0.50 megabits per second (Mbps), was the slowest of all 224 countries surveyed. That puts the secretive and isolated Central Asian country behind even war-torn nations such as Yemen, South Sudan, Somalia and Afghanistan in terms of Internet speed, the report showed. (Source: [RFE/RL, 3 December 2021](#))

Security situation

All borders are guarded by police, secret services and the army, especially the borders with Iran and Afghanistan. There are checkpoints along all major routes. Media are monitored, and public rooms and also hotel rooms are likely to be tapped.

According to [World Scientific](#) (accessed 1 May 2024):

- "Despite being an immediate neighbour of Afghanistan, Turkmenistan (formerly known as Turkmenia), remains largely unaffected by terrorism. According to the Global Terrorism Index (GTI), published by the Institute for Economics and Peace the risk of a terrorist attack in Turkmenistan remains low. Nevertheless, Turkmenistan, like other countries bordering Afghanistan, is concerned about the implications of the US military drawdown from Afghanistan. The presence of the Taliban, Al Qaeda and its affiliated Central Asian militant groups in Afghanistan and Pakistan pose a potential threat to Turkmenistan. Furthermore, transnational crime such as drug production and smuggling in Afghanistan have exacerbated in recent years. There have also been reports that the citizens of Turkmenistan are fighting among rebel forces against the Syrian government. The Turkmen fighters returning to home from Syria is another legitimate security concern for the Turkmen government."

On 3 January 2022, Turkmen border guards were reportedly involved in a sustained exchange of fire with Taliban forces, the first known time the two have been in a shoot-out. According to Helal Balkhi, head of the Taliban's Information Department in the northern Jowzjan Province, it was Turkmen border guards who started shooting and the incident came after Turkmen troops shot and killed an Afghan civilian in the same area several days earlier. The Turkmen side did not comment on the incident; state media always go to great lengths to avoid reporting any bad news concerning Turkmenistan (Source: [RFE/RL, 5 January 2022](#)).

Christians in Turkmenistan need to be extremely careful. Police and secret services constantly monitor their activities. It is very difficult for foreign Christians to visit Turkmenistan - either as a tourist or in

any other role. Only a very limited number of foreigners visit the country. It is practically impossible to get a religious visa to visit the churches. Only short-term visits (5 days) will be allowed in rare cases. All visitors are monitored by the government. Citizens are also hindered from visiting Christians in other countries. Exit visas are required and are often denied.

Christian origins

The first Christians to enter Central Asia (including Turkmenistan) were Nestorian missionaries in the 4th century. From the 5th century onwards there were great movements of peoples in Asia and Europe and for Turkmenistan this meant the arrival of a Turkic tribe from eastern Asia named Oghuz (the ethnic ancestors of the Turkmen). According to Islamic tradition, Islam entered the region in the 8th century, following the tracks of the Silk Road trade route. Christians subsequently disappeared from the country.

In the 16th century, Turkmenistan became part of the Uzbek khanates of Khiva and Bukhara which deeply influenced the country’s culture and religion.

The current presence of Christians in Turkmenistan dates from the 19th century. In 1867, the Russian Empire expanded its territory into Central Asia during a number of military campaigns, conquering the khanates of Khiva and Bukhara. The regime brought in ethnic Russians, who mostly belonged to the Russian Orthodox Church. During the Second World War, Joseph Stalin ordered the deportation of large numbers of ethnic Germans, Ukrainians, Poles and Koreans to Central Asia. With them, other Christian denominations found their way into Turkmenistan.

Church spectrum today

Turkmenistan: Church networks	Christians	%
Orthodox	149,000	90.9
Catholic	330	0.2
Protestant	2,400	1.5
Independent	10,100	6.2
Unaffiliated	2,200	1.3
Doubly-affiliated Christians	0	0.0
Total	164,030	100.0
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	600	0.4
Pentecostal-Charismatic	3,800	2.3

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

Orthodox: Eastern (Chalcedonian), Oriental (Pre-Chalcedonian, Non-Chalcedonian, Monophysite), Nestorian (Assyrian), and non-historical Orthodox. **Roman Catholics:** All Christians in communion with the Church of Rome. **Protestants:** Christians in churches originating in or in communion with the Western world's 16th-century Protestant Reformation. Includes Anglicans, Lutherans and Baptists (any of whom may be Charismatic) and denominational Pentecostals, but not Independent traditions such as Independent Baptists nor independent Charismatics. **Independents:** Christians who do not identify with the major Christian traditions (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant). **Unaffiliated Christians:** Persons professing publicly to be Christians but who are not affiliated to churches. **Doubly-affiliated Christians:** Persons affiliated to or claimed by 2 denominations at once. **Evangelical movement:** Churches, denominations, and individuals who identify themselves as evangelicals by membership in denominations linked to evangelical alliances (e.g., World Evangelical Alliance) or by self-identification in polls. **Pentecostal-Charismatic:** Church members involved in renewal in the Holy Spirit, sometimes known collectively as "Renewalists".

According to the World Christian Database (accessed May 2024) the largest official church denominations in Turkmenistan are:

- Russian Orthodox Church
- Armenian Apostolic Church

The biggest church is the Russian Orthodox Church and its members are practically all ethnic Russians. As in many other countries in Central Asia the Christian community is having to face the emigration of many Russians. Members of the Armenian Apostolic Church are predominantly ethnic Armenians. The members of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church are mostly ethnic Ukrainians.

There is little trust and cooperation between the various denominations, a fact which the government utilizes to its advantage.

Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on the Research & Reports pages of the Open Doors website:

- <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/>.

These are also available on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom):

- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Turkmenistan>
- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/>.

External Links

- Recent history: dead - <https://www.rferl.org/a/turkmen-celebs-try-to-debunk-rumors-of-president-s-death/30082030.html>
- Recent history: opening of a conference - <https://www.rferl.org/a/gurbanguly-berdymukhammedov-turkmenistan-/30105422.html>
- Recent history: WHO delegation - <https://turkmenistan.un.org/en/53288-press-briefing-whoeurope-experts-preliminary-outcomes-their-covid-19-mission-turkmenistan>
- Recent history: claimed - <https://www.voanews.com/extremism-watch/turkmenistan-clamps-down-covid-19-criticism>
- Recent history: RFE/RL, 14 February 2022 - <https://www.rferl.org/a/31702881.html>
- Recent history: RFE/RL, 15 March 2022 - <https://www.rferl.org/a/31753690.html>
- Recent history: HRW 2023 Turkmenistan country chapter - <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/turkmenistan>
- Recent history: RFE/RL, 14 December 2022 - <https://www.rferl.org/a/turkmenistan-pro-russian-anti-western/32176574.html>
- Recent history: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, 19 January 2024 - <http://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/feature-articles/item/13785-russian-influence-in-turkmenistan-rapprochement-or-pragmatism?.html>
- Political and legal landscape: IRFR 2023 Turkmenistan - <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-report-on-international-religious-freedom/turkmenistan/>

- Political and legal landscape: USCIRF 2024 Turkmenistan Chapter - <https://www.uscifr.gov/annual-reports?country=71>
- Political and legal landscape: 2018 periodic report - https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolNo=CEDAW/C/TKM/CO/5&Lang=En
- Political and legal landscape: Girls Not Brides Turkmenistan - <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/child-marriage-atlas/regions-and-countries/turkmenistan/>
- Political and legal landscape: RFE/RL, 4 May 2022 - <https://www.rferl.org/a/turkmenistan-restrictions-women-appearance-travel/31834476.html>
- Political and legal landscape: The Diplomat, 3 May 2022). - <https://thediplomat.com/2022/05/turkmenistan-takes-policing-womens-bodies-to-the-next-level/>
- Political and legal landscape: AsiaNews, 12 May 2022 - <https://www.asianews.it/news-en/The-misogyny-of-the-new-Turkmen-president-55786.html>
- Political and legal landscape: World Factbook Turkmenistan - <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/turkmenistan/>
- Political and legal landscape: US State Department IRFR 2022 Turkmenistan - <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/turkmenistan/>
- Religious landscape description: IRFR 2023 Turkmenistan - <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-report-on-international-religious-freedom/turkmenistan/>
- Economic landscape: World Bank Turkmenistan data - <https://data.worldbank.org/country/turkmenistan>
- Economic landscape: April 2019 - <https://jamestown.org/program/turkmenistans-gas-exports-hampered-by-geopolitical-realities/>
- Economic landscape: mismanagement - <https://www.rferl.org/a/qishloq-ovozi-turkmenistan-health-risk-berdymukhammedov-animal-diseases-herbal-remedies/30313192.html>
- Economic landscape: Turkmenistan - <https://www.rferl.org/a/food-shortages-ashgabat-turkmenistan/30187280.html>
- Economic landscape: billions - <https://www.rferl.org/a/qishloq-ovozi-plunging-oil-prices-kazakhstan-turkmenistan-economic-problems/30572905.html>
- Economic landscape: withdrawals - <https://www.rferl.org/a/turkmen-district-further-restricts-daily-atm-cash-withdrawals-card-payments/30535309.html>
- Economic landscape: RFE/RL, 16 November 2021 - <https://www.rferl.org/a/turkmenistan-hardship-control-information/31564824.html>
- Economic landscape: March 2020 - <https://www.rferl.org/a/turkmenistan-coronavirus-food-prices-skyrocket--special-measures/30508897.html?lflags=mailer>
- Economic landscape: RFE/RL, 5 November 2021 - <https://www.rferl.org/a/turkmenistan-covid-ashgabat-shops-shut/31547315.html>
- Economic landscape: 2016 Employment Act - https://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/natlex4.detail?p_lang=en&p_isn=105760&p_country=TKM
- Economic landscape: GIWPS Turkmenistan - <https://giwps.georgetown.edu/country/turkmenistan/>
- Social and cultural landscape: World Factbook Turkmenistan - <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/turkmenistan/>
- Social and cultural landscape: UNDP Human Development Report Turkmenistan - <https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/specific-country-data#/countries/TKM>
- Social and cultural landscape: RFE/RL, 22 April 2022 - <https://www.rferl.org/a/31816546.html>
- Social and cultural landscape: RFE/RL, 14 December 2022 - <https://www.rferl.org/a/turkmenistan-pro-russian-anti-western/32176574.html>
- Social and cultural landscape: RFE/RL - <https://www.rferl.org/a/turkemenstan-mass-exodus-passports-poverty/32262495.html>
- Social and cultural landscape: AsiaNews - <https://www.asianews.it/news-en/Little-work-and-paltry-salaries-Turkmen-seek-their-fortune-abroad-58234.html>
- Social and cultural landscape: RFE/RL, 17 October 2023 - <https://www.rferl.org/a/turkmenistan-food-shortages-price-hikes-holiday-season/32641617.html>
- Social and cultural landscape: AsiaNews, 2 February 2024 - <https://www.asianews.it/news-en/Asgabat-the-digital-school-without-Internet-60064.html>

- Social and cultural landscape: AsiaNews, 27 February 2024 - <https://www.asianews.it/news-en/Child-labour-exploitation-in-the-cotton-harvest-in-Turkmenistan-60229.html>
- Social and cultural landscape: RFE/RL, 12 May 2022 - <https://www.asianews.it/news-en/The-misogyny-of-the-new-Turkmen-president-55786.html>
- Social and cultural landscape: GIWPS Turkmenistan - <https://giwps.georgetown.edu/country/turkmenistan/>
- Social and cultural landscape: CEDAW, 2018 - https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CEDAW/C/TKM/CO/5&Lang=En
- Social and cultural landscape: UN Turkmenistan, July 2020 - <https://turkmenistan.un.org/en/53001-putting-brakes-covid-19-safeguarding-health-and-rights-women-and-girls>
- Social and cultural landscape: OSCE, September 2021 - <https://www.osce.org/centre-in-ashgabat/497359>
- Social and cultural landscape: CEDAW, 2018 - https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CEDAW/C/TKM/CO/5&Lang=En
- Technological landscape: DataReportal Digital 2024: Turkmenistan - <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2024-turkmenistan>
- Technological landscape: small gender gap - <https://www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/GSMA-The-Mobile-Gender-Gap-Report-2020.pdf>
- Technological landscape: BuddeComm Research - <https://www.budde.com.au/Research/Turkmenistan-Telecoms-Mobile-and-Broadband-Statistics-and-Analyses>
- Technological landscape: RFE/RL, 3 December 2021 - <https://www.rferl.org/a/turkmenistan-slowest-internet-world/31592055.html>
- Security situation: World Scientific - https://www.worldscientific.com/doi/pdf/10.1142/9781783269969_0022
- Security situation: RFE/RL, 5 January 2022 - <https://www.rferl.org/a/turkmen-taliban-border-shoot-out/31640971.html>